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(Vision Letter Editor Winthrop P. Carty, arrived in Georgetown the night of the mass suicide-murders at the People's Temple. He was one of the first outside correspondents, if not the very first, to arrive on the scene of the most lurid story of the decade. While the essential story has been thoroughly told in the U.S. press, Carty here examines some of the key secondary questions.)

GUYANESE POST-MORTEM

The tragic story of the People's Temple has many sidebars:

1) Was the outside world blameworthy for not taking a closer look at Jonestown before the stroke of death? As a practical matter, both the U.S. and Guyana had the authority to intervene. Over 900 deaths could have been prevented.

The State Department falls back on technicalities. Officials point out that more than 75 persons were interviewed in Jonestown without one cult member's requesting safe conduct. Furthermore, the U.S. government had sharply limited legal options. The People's Temple was located in a sovereign nation. And U.S. law is dedicated to the protection of religious freedom, no matter how bizarre a sect's practices may seem to nonbelievers. Finally, the allegations against Jim Jones and Jonestown were from "unreliable" sources and unproved. In sum, the argument goes, U.S. authorities had no legitimate right to intervene into the affairs of Jonestown.

The State Department's legalistic position seems unassailable. But nobody will deny the larger point: Had the U.S. authorities foreseen the end result of Jim Jones' psychotic society, Washington would have found in a moment the legal rationale for intervening.

Washington was reluctant to examine Jonestown too closely for essentially domestic political reasons. Jim Jones had strong connections in California and claimed a wire to the White House. He seemingly was a prophet of racial integration and liberal economics. No matter that he was a crazy charlatan, a white exploiter of blacks, a sex maniac, a devil-god--the State Department risked accusations of religious intolerance, McCarthyism, bigotry and the like by looking behind the Jonestown facade.

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The Guyanese government of Prime Minister Forbes Burnham also had political reasons for taking an unquestioning attitude toward Jim Jones. Jonestown seemed a microcosm of all that Burnham holds dear for Guyana: a socialist society, living in racial harmony, dedicated to taming the jungle fastness. Despite 12 years in power, Burnham finds himself presiding over a muddled economy, a nation divided by antagonism between blacks and East Indians and a citizenry increasingly more given to the comforts of urban life than to a pioneering effort in the hostile jungle.

Guyanese officials appear more sincerely surprised by Jonestown's depravity than Embassy officials. "We not only thought they were doing good work," a minor minister told me, "we deeply admired them. We thought they were doing something that we seem incapable of doing: opening up the potential of our land." Furthermore, Mervyn Dymally, the Trinidad-born Lieutenant Governor of California, carried weight in Georgetown. The black official twice visited Jonestown and had high praise for Jim Jones. And Jones flashed letters, many of them bogus, from Rosalynn Carter and other U.S. figures. The fact remains, however, that the Burnham government allowed an armed "state within a state" to grow unchecked on its national territory.

Many neutral observers swear up and down that they knew full well that the People's Temple was a timebomb. The manager of the Pegasus Hotel in Georgetown, for example, related how a woman journalist from San Francisco came last April to try to report on Jonestown. Threats were made on her life, callers claimed bombs had been placed in the hotel and four fires were set in the building. The police tapped the Georgetown phone of People's Temple to track the cult's activities. They were able, therefore, to intercept a woman in the hotel and on her way to the journalist's room with the seeming intent to commit murder. Eight members were arrested, taken to the jail and, to the utter astonishment of the police on the case, quickly released by a phone call from on high. The San Francisco woman, it was claimed, was unstable. Maybe the woman was crazy and maybe she wasn't--the hotel manager noted--but the cultists' activities left no question about their turn of mind.

The outside world's non-observance of something amiss in Jonestown had some of the elements of a prior generation's blindness to the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps: It was politically convenient to see no evil.

It should not be forgotten, however, that one man--Congressman Leo Ryan--did, in fact, uncover the truth, albeit belatedly and tragically. The Californian had virtually the same information that the State Department possessed but he grasped the nettle. Ryan was obviously a politician with a good nose for publicity. But he didn't go to Jonestown to put his obituary on the front pages of the world's press. Ryan cared enough to walk the high ledge.

2) What are the implications of the U.S. press collectively covering a story in a poor Third World nation?

Jonestown wasn't your average tale of Third World woe. And the principals were North Americans. But the act of over 900 people expiring at the command of

a mad leader created so much world attention and so much competitive news coverage, and contained so many exotic and incomprehensible elements that it served to magnify the worth and sins of the U.S. press.

Significantly, many of the reporters who arrived in Guyana had covered Vietnam, a place where they had the privileges of occupancy without the cares of citizenship. Inescapably, they saw the Guyanese as mere stagehands in the drama of People's Temple.

Reporters not only suffered culture shock, they were tripped up by something the locals call MAD--maximum administrative delay. Embarrassed that it had artlessly welcomed a demented swindler into its back yard, the Burnham government tried to throw a blanket over the tragedy at Jonestown. The Guyanese increasingly were seen as shifty incompetents raising barriers to newsmen trying to report the hottest story in years.

The attitudes and doings of the Guyanese were incidental to the story and were scarcely reported. What was reported generally offended the locals. The contrast in wealth became a point of friction. U.S. newsmen were able to take all the best hotel rooms, commandeer all the nation's private planes and get a dollar-hold on Georgetown's taxis. The Guyanese never understood the competitive nature of the U.S. press. As more and more reporters arrived, Georgetown's limited resources were stretched beyond the breaking point. The Minister of Information asked that the journalists select a pool reporter to write on the Jonestown situation. The reporters, however, wanted their exclusive stories and demanded that transportation to Jonestown be made available for all. "You are criticizing us for our poverty," lamented Shirley Field-Ridley, the Minister of Information.

Each reporter has his own favorite image of the bedraggled Guyanese. My picture is that of the K-9 corps officer standing proudly outside the Pegasus Hotel with a Chihuahua souped up with some German Shepherd genes. The mutt wagged its tail furiously when a stranger approached and the soldier beamed.

The Guyanese have their images too: The ethnocentric freebooters cashing in on a grisly affair. "Grave robbers," an information ministry official exclaimed when I noted that the reporters were in competition for journalistic prizes, movie rights, T.V. docudrama scripts, instant book manuscripts and eyewitness accounts and pictures of the deathday. The Burnham government, which keeps the opposition on short newsprint rations, didn't understand a system which nurtured such unbridled competition for negative news.

Many North American journalists will win awards, gain promotions, go on the lecture tour, write instant books and otherwise be celebrated. But the massive arrival of the U.S. press corps was a cultural invasion to the Guyanese. There will be no prizes given to reporters for furthering the Western concept of "the people's right to know" in the Third World.

3) What did the Jonestown tragedy mean politically to the Burnham Administration?

From the outset, Burnham knew that he had political problems. Rumors had long floated in Georgetown that high officials were receiving financial and sexual favors

from the U.S. cult. In any case, the Burnham government was known to encourage the establishment of oddball groups in the country. The movement was touted as showing Guyana as a progressive haven, opening up the interior and, for the black minority, the influx was said to dilute the East Indian's racial majority. In sum, the welcome mat was presented as a heady development strategy. The calamitous end, therefore, was identified as Burnham's failure.

Burnham, Jonestown aside, is having his problems. Bauxite and sugar exports, Guyana's meal ticket, produce less income on today's depressed world market. Bad weather has hurt agricultural production. Guyana's traditionally high unemployment rate is rising daily. The country is broke and experiencing a negative GNP growth rate. Earlier this year the nation had to conclude a $22 million loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

Rattling the tin cup outside the bastion of international capitalism was embarrassing for a government guiding a nation through "the transition to socialism." In any case, it was tough for a socialist government to accept the IMF-imposed austerity program. Burnham is faced with laying off government workers, raising domestic taxes and cutting imports to the bone. A scheme to boost social security costs immediately heightened the racial tensions that underlie the nation's life. Urban black workers, who dominate the powerful trade-union movement, demanded that revenues be raised from increased taxation of the agrarian sector where the East Indians live. The unions rejected Burnham's scheme, a menacing show of independence by the black Prime Minister's traditional political wellspring.

Furthermore, Burnham is in the delicate mid-passage of a constitutional shell game. The government claims the present constitution "came from the sky" in colonial days and doesn't reflect the realities of developing, socialist Guyana. It must, therefore, be made "flexible." The English Parliament, enviously notes barrister Lionel Luckhoos, a government apologist, has the freedom to "deem a man a woman, and hey-presto, that is given effect." Hey-presto has a nice ring but the Guyanese constitution hasn't prevented the Burnham government from doing anything, legal or illegal, it wants.

The change of constitution has two objectives. First, it answers the ancient conundrum: If you're so smart, why ain't you rich? Burnham has had power for 12 years but the nation is still a wreck. The constitutional mumbo-jumbo suggests the country has been held back by a colonial inheritance and now Guyana is finally on its way to claim its destiny. Second, the constitutional change neatly delays a national election which should have taken place earlier this year. Last summer a referendum on the plan was held and widely boycotted. The government claims that the turnout was great and 98 percent of the voters approved the proposed change.

Burnham, then, is in basic trouble. The educated classes are disenchanted and leaving the country. The constitutional process has been distorted to prop up the long-ruling government. Official mismanagement and austerity are falling hard on the poor. And in a racially divided nation, the minority questionably holds the reins of power.

The Jonestown affair has given Cheddi Jagan, the Marxist leader of the East Indian opposition, a sensational new issue. The Jaganites are claiming a massive cover-up is taking place. Burnham maintains absolute silence about what is called Jonesgate. As it was, he was having trouble explaining Burnhamgate, the present political and economic mess in Guyana.

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